

Chapter 2: Forces of Change

- The 1890s dawned on a vibrant Wilmington in which African Americans played a vital role in the city's economic and political life.
- The Farmer's Alliance emerged by the end of the 1880s as a powerful political machine, and evolved into the Populist Party by 1892. Populists challenged Democrats and Republicans but most closely associated their platform with Republicans.
- Populists and Republicans created a coalition known as Fusion by the 1894 election. Fusion candidates defeated Democrats statewide and gained control of the General Assembly. Democrats were poorly organized and failed to mount a successful offense against the well-organized Fusionists led by Populist Marion Butler and Republican Daniel Russell.
- The 1895 Fusion legislature reformed state and local government, effectively curtailing the ability of incumbent Democratic officials to hold sway in local matters.
- Democrats lost to a well-organized Fusion campaign in 1896. Daniel Russell was elected as the state's first Republican governor since Reconstruction. The Fusionist legislature of 1897 made sweeping changes to Wilmington's city charter. Local white leaders were unhappy with the changes and unsuccessfully challenged the legality of the charter changes.
- The new city charter allowed each of the city's five wards to elect an alderman with Governor Russell holding the ability to appoint the other five aldermen. The charter change, coupled with Russell's patronage practices, led to claims of racism from both white Democrats and black Republicans.
- Although African American voters fell in line behind Republican candidates, they often took issue with both Republican and Fusionist strategies and candidates.
- Wilmington's black businesses grew at a faster pace than in other N. C. cities and African American workers flocked to the city.
- The black community established institutions to assist those wishing to buy a house, including the development of the Peoples Perpetual Building and Loan Association in 1889 and the American Union Association in 1897. Strides were made in home ownership, and, in 1897, over one thousand African Americans owned some sort of property in the city.
- The city's black schools prospered with increased numbers of educators drawn from the local ranks. Support organizations strengthened the city's efforts in providing public education.
- A distinctive social and cultural environment developed in Wilmington's African American population, bolstered by schools, wealth, and inherited status.
- As the 1890s wore on, Wilmington's white leaders sought methods to return to political office and economic prominence. Key to this effort was the movement to regain Democratic control of the legislature through clandestine operations.